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The Elections held in East Timor in May 1982

Elections were held in East Timor and in Indonesia in May 1982. They were the first to take place in East Timor since 1975, when Indonesia invaded the territory, outlawing the previous government and decreeing martial law.

When the result was declared, General M. Jusuf, Indonesian Minister of Defence, asserted that "the general elections in East Timor prove to the outside world that the Indonesian Government has granted the people of East Timor their proper democratic rights" (Sinar Harapan, May 5th 1982). For a number of reasons, this claim is not justified.

1. First of all, the elections in East Timor cannot be said to have restored to the people of East Timor "their proper democratic rights" because Indonesia occupies the territory illegally, thereby depriving its people of the basic right to choose their own political system and elect their own political representatives. It is the view of the United Nations General Assembly and international opinion that the people of East Timor have not exercised their basic and inalienable right to self-determination: until they have done so, no election can be held to be valid.

2. Secondly, after invading the territory in 1975, the Indonesian authorities banned all the existing parties in East Timor - notably Fretilin, the U.D.T. and Apodeti. Since then, the territory has lived under martial law without free political activity.

In the current campaign, only three parties were permitted to field candidates: GOLKAR (the government party), the P.P.P. (a Muslim party) and the P.D.I. (a coalition of Christians and Nationalists). None of these parties has roots in East Timor. None of the Timorese parties was permitted to campaign. Under these conditions, even if it is assumed that votes were cast freely, the election must be considered to be an artificial consultation of the East Timorese electorate. The Deputy Governor of East Timor, Mr Lopez da Cruz, described the situation - perhaps more clearly than he intended - when he told visiting Indonesian journalists in Dili on election day that "the only contest between the contestants was over who could decorate the polling booths most attractively" (Sinar Harapan, May 5th 1982).

3. It cannot be assumed that votes were cast freely, for two kinds of reasons:

3.1 Electoral irregularities and fraud. Polling was not secret. The Sinar Harapan journalist who covered the election in East Timor reported that there were three separate ballot boxes, one for each party. There were three "white" boxes for the election of members of parliament, and three "yellow" boxes for the election of members of the local assembly. A former minister in the Suharto government, Mr Slamet Bratanata, cited this arrangement as an example of the "blatent abuses of official power" (Times, London, June 3rd 1982).

It must also be said that ample evidence exists to show that fraud and improper influence are frequent during Indonesian elections. Few foreign obser-

vers were permitted to observe the elections in East Timor, but it is known that GOLKAR T-shirts were widely distributed and that some Protestant ministers called upon their congregations to vote for GOLKAR as a religious duty.

Considering that East Timor is a mountainous and inaccessible territory with a severely damaged road system and few modern communications, it is further remarkable that the authorities were able to announce the election returns in East Timor well before those for most regions of Indonesia.

The official returns were as follows:

Number of registered voters			306 506
Number of votes cast			311 325
Of which:	GOLKAR	309 608	
	P.P.P.	673	
	P.D.I.	1 044	

The size of the turnout should also give cause for concern, firstly because the number of voters claimed was greater than the number registered, and secondly because it is hard to imagine how a 100% turnout might be achieved voluntarily in East Timor, given the admitted degree of opposition to Indonesian rule, the very poor state of health of many of the population, and transport and communications difficulties.

3.2 Military and administrative pressure. These irregularities assume even greater significance when it is known that members of the administration and the armed forces are under an obligation to promote the government party, GOLKAR, throughout Indonesia. East Timor is effectively under a military administration. It is impossible to enter, leave or travel in the territory without military permission. Much of the population has been resettled and brought under constant military surveillance and is dependent on the administration for food. Corruption, abuses and physical violence on the part of officials and soldiers are notorious and the impossibility of obtaining redress has been a matter of frequent complaint. In addition, hostilities continue: in 1981, the Indonesian armed forces carried out a "pacification" operation for which, in certain parts of the territory, every Timorese male between the ages of 15 and 55 was conscripted and as a result of which many Timorese died.

Under these conditions, it is implausible to claim that people in East Timor are able to cast their votes freely. To vote against GOLKAR meant voting against the Army and Administration, in defiance of officers and officials who may arrest a person without cause and whose powers of detention are not open to challenge in any court or tribunal.

For these reasons, the May elections in East Timor give no guide to the true wishes of the population of East Timor, who were asked to vote under duress for parties not of their choosing, in conditions which did not provide secrecy or protection against abuse. No political significance should therefore be attached to them.